



UNIVERSITY OF
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IFAS EXTENSION

Friday's Feature

By

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Landscaping with fire in mind

While Floridians have had more than their fair share of natural disasters in the past few years, we may be sitting on another calamity just waiting to be lit. Dead trees and limbs from tropical storms and frost killed vegetation are still on the ground in many rural areas and vacant lots, making our region more fire-prone.

Recent wildfires have made us aware of our vulnerability in times of low rainfall. Frequent, low intensity fires have been part of Florida's ecological history for thousands of years. But now we have built homes right into the forests and established a wildland-urban interface. Homeowners in high risk, fire-prone areas should take steps on their individual properties to assist in the protection of their homes.

It may be time to take a careful look at your landscaping and the areas around your property and become firewise. To be "firewise" is to be adequately prepared for the possibility of wildfire. This includes creating a landscape that reduces house and property vulnerability to wildfire.

The two factors that determine your wildfire risk is how the land is used in your area and the kind of vegetation around your home. If you live in a subdivision or urban area surrounded by homes and lawns it is unlikely that a wildfire would reach your house. But if you have undeveloped lots or wooded land near your home, you could be at some risk in the event of a wildfire.

The best way to protect your home from wildfires is to have a protection zone around your home. The goal of firewise landscaping is to develop a design and to choose plants that offer the best defensible space possible.

The further away flammable plants are from your home, the better the chances to avoid fire damage. It doesn't mean you need to remove all plants from around your house, but utilizing the following suggestions will improve the fire protection of your home.

- Trim lower branches up to ten feet on tall trees, remove vines from trees and keep shrubbery away from pine trees so that a fire on the ground cannot climb up these "fuel ladders" to the treetops.
- Landscape your defensible space to make it difficult for fire to spread to your house. Use shrub islands or patches of perennials rather than continuous beds of plantings. Thin trees so branches do not touch each other.
- Keep combustible items like wood piles, compost piles, gas grills, gas cans and propane tanks at least 30 feet away from your house.
- Remove dead vegetation.
- Keep large, leafy, hardwood trees in your yard, particularly on the east and west sides of your house. Their shade cools your house, and the flat leaves trap moisture on the ground. Large pine trees also provide good shade. Trim lower branches and rake up pine needles.

- Remove flammable plants like saw palmetto, wax myrtle, yaupon holly, red cedar, and gallberry within 30 feet of your home. These shrubs are appropriate farther from your home and in natural areas. They contain resins, oils, and wax that burn readily.
- Some plants that are not as flammable include dogwood, viburnum, redbud, sycamore, magnolia, beautyberry, oaks, red maple, native azalea, sweetgum, coontie, winged elm, black cherry, persimmon, wild plum, fringetree, ferns and sparkleberry.

Once firewise plants are selected and the landscape created, routine maintenance is essential. Routine maintenance includes timely pruning, proper irrigation and the removal of dead leaves, branches and dead annual herbaceous plants.

To keep aware of your local wildfire danger, consult the Keetch-Byram Drought Index (KBDI). It is a number between 0 and 800 that gives forecasters a clue as to how dry it is. High values of the KBDI are an indication that conditions are favorable for the occurrence and spread of wildfires. For current KBDI ratings, you can go to the Division of Forestry website at http://www.fl-dof.com/fire_weather/KBDI/.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>